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# GOOD FRIDAY AND CLASSICAL PROFESSORS

BY STARK YOUNG

I ARRIVED at Girgenti early in the morning of Good Friday and went straight from the hotel to the cathedral for the ceremonies.

All Girgenti is tawny-colored and dull rose and white. It is a stern, dry city, lying on the sunbaked hill like a lion. The streets are steep and winding in every direction, deep as caverns and full of stairs. Rising up in these streets are the church fronts, full of Spanish and Arabic memories, rich, baroque, heavy, barbaric, half cruel like so much of the town. Many of the streets look down on the sea below. And at night through the columns of the temples outside the walls I have seen the sea shining in the starlight.

This city was the Acragas of the Greeks, the Agrigentum of the Romans, and has been Carthaginian, Saracen, Spanish, as well as Italian. All that is left of its larger glories is the cathedral, for the temples lie now in the country. The cathedral is a huge thing on twenty feet of stairs, faded golden stone, honey-colored in the light, and falling away here and there into ruin. The vast doorway opens into an interior still more ruined. Enormous columns lead up to the broken vaulting and make an aisle between the high altar of the choir at one end and at the other to the great crucifix with the life-sized figure of Christ. In many places underfoot the pavement has come away and the bare earth appears.

There was a throng of people, standing praying, talking, quietly watching each other, and looking on at the mass. From behind a column somewhere an organ was playing. Clouds of incense hung about and there was a smell of spring flowers. A procession of priests, acolytes, seminarians and choir-boys came from the sacristy and moved slowly to the choir, toward which

ran a long strip of brocade leading to the altar itself. Two of the priests in the procession came up before the steps, putting their palms together in front of them, and knelt down on their knees and kissed the earth, then passed on up and took their places. Then another two of them came, knelt down and kissed the earth. And so on, all the procession, two by two, slowly, all kneeling to kiss the earth before they went up the steps. A bell rang and the people dropped to their knees. Meanwhile far down in the cathedral you could hear the organ playing; and in the choir, where the candles burned against the dim stone and the faint mist of old frescoes and the old blackened canvasses of saints, the priests chanted.

That night before midnight I was awakened by a music of trumpets and cornets and pipes, a dirge, in a strange mode something like the music I had heard once among the Arabs. I went to the balcony and saw in the deep and narrow streets below, against the tawny stone and wild heavy shadows, a procession of people streaming past. They carried every one some sort of light, lanterns made of paper on staffs, and candles and torches; and they chanted as they marched. Their lights were not carried overhead or on the shoulders, as our processions do, but down at the waist; and so made a marvellous effect: they did not make a mere glitter of lights and sparks above darkened figures, but a throng of glowing shapes, lighted forms and faces, in the darkness, moving along and casting incredible shadows on the steep walls and houses.

At the head of the procession they had carried past the Virgin, wreathed with flowers and standing on a kind of platform surrounded by lamps; the stiff image under its velvet canopy contrasted strangely with the human forms moving below. Afterward there were people for a long time making the procession, and presently they brought the figure of the dead Christ, taken down from the crucifix in the cathedral and laid on a bier in a glass coffin, with lamps burning around Him, moving slowly, with the dirge playing and the people chanting it: the pallid figure with its bleeding side and its crown of thorns, and the strange hypnotism again of the still form above the motion of the figures below. Then the endless procession again, filing

past, with more music, the lighted bodies in the old streets, their shadows, the dirge playing on the horns, in the darkness.

I stood on the balcony long after the last of the people were gone and the music had died away in the far-off streets. The stars were shining; they were near the earth and golden-colored. It was all beautiful and strange and pagan; it was barbaric, ancient. It had the sense in it of passionate continuity, of the unbroken relation to the old life of the earth, to the soil, to light, to motion and things. It brought to my mind the memory of those early dark races, half unknown to history, whose strains made a part of the ancient blood, and spoke in the shadowy omens and cults and secret rites. Demeter the Earth Mother, Mary the Mother of God, the strange music on the horns, the torches, the mourning for Adonis, the dead god carried on the shoulders of his mourners, the flowers, the old city and the spring night. The life of the Mediterranean, ancient, continuous, unbroken! Moments like this have in them the quality of the life of men and the life of the earth become one; the body becomes one with the things of the world; the uplifted hand lifts up the heart with it; the lanterns and shadows are not only in the street but shine and darken in the soul.

From all this strange wild beauty and poetry I subsided next morning with coffee and rolls to thoughts of our professors of the classics.

Classical professors! I thought of their plaster casts white as chalk and dry as ashes. Of their Ciceronian jargon and Roman platitudes. Of their dens and studies full of weak watercolors of Roman ruins and spotted with brown prints of the Parthenon and Apollo and the Forum, and a higgledypiggledy of tiny reproductions from Pompeii. I thought of their modest exhortations and mottoes and their chaste renderings of ancient authors into English. Of their fig-leaf editions of the poets!

How much do they know of all this that I saw, with the kissing of the ground before the altar candles and the host in the tabernacle, the pale god and his mother and the music and torches through the old streets? Do the professors really believe that the temples had yellow capitals, or red columns with blue capitals and gilded acanthus leaves? Do their eyes remember that

sometimes beyond the rocks and oleanders you saw at the head of a valley a vermillion shrine? Why then the casts? Or do they remember, when they make their little axiomatic sermonettes so full of exalted sentiments, that the Greeks included all things that are actually a part of us in their scheme of living, however regrettable these things were then, though not unmentionable, as the professor would have them now? One professor of Greek told me that he considered the Greeks the most immoral race that ever lived. A professor of Latin that I know has spent much of his life on the theology of Milton taken seriously and in comparison with Homer, a heathen with a very poor theological showing. How far do these good men, when they are sorting out of Plato and Hesiod the desired order and discretion, conceive at all those other forces also working in these ancient minds: beauty and madness, fierce changes, barbaric blood, sudden earthly poetry, and darkness; so much of all which was here in Girgenti still, though the wider intellectual aspects had dropped away from it.

After all, of course, we are not Greek and must make Greek things over for ourselves somewhat before we can use them, give them our own image; though we may at least remember that we have done so. And certainly a good deal of the ethical and the institutional the professors bring over, or at least illuminate, by means of the classics; though this is done better perhaps by the special departments in these subjects. But as for all this social and ethical thinking of the professors, usually apprehended by the students only from the agonies of getting through one book of Plato perhaps or a few of Aeschylus' choruses, and then understood largely with the help of translations; and as for all the talked-of character-building of our fathers' time; I doubt if much of it is very true to the classics. I am not sure how much it is tinged with Mediaeval theology; or how much the Romans would recognize it, not to speak of the Greeks. And the fact remains that these classroom conclusions are extracted not from philosophy but mainly from literature, whose very truth consists of infinite living elements blended together, and rests always on a foundation of a life of the senses, of natural experience.

But the professors have at least done well with Roman maxims suited to empire building and limited suffrage. They can lash the new time with their bull-headed old Cato and his supposedly pristine virtues; how much better can they give off those gaseous Roman morals than Greek light! Musty Oxford clergymen mincing fine old phrases, with the English system of pronouncing, over walnuts and wine, or in their leisurely debates! Or translating Aeschylus with majestic sleepy imitations of Shakespeare; or filling Euripides with a sighing Tennysonian bliss. Dr. Jowett giving Plato a pious flavor unknown to the Greek mind by translating him, as a friend of mine said, not into the English language but into the Christian language.

I sat there in Girgenti that morning with my coffee, which was very bad, looking down into the daylight street where the procession had passed the night before. I was thinking now of those classical exhibitions I had seen in young ladies' academies at home, the young ladies going through soft Delsarte movements, dressed in white, with white fillets and Psyche knots, and girdles crossing over their breasts; posturing with their lovely arms and looking through hoops, very nice and proper surely with nothing demonstrative about them. I thought of that dirge in the harsh stone city and then of Dante, mediaeval but the son of the ancient passionate art; and then of the dullness and grey wash of Professor Norton's translation, commended in Boston. Then the picture came to me of a professor reading Theodore Martin's translation of Catullus to the class in college. We came to the Lesbia poem:

soles occidere et redire possunt:  
nobis, cum semel occidit brevis lux,  
nox est perpetua una dormienda.

I heard the pitiful necessity of that gerundive in *dormienda*, and the cadence of it, the poetry of lament, full of incantation and despair; and then I listened while the professor gave us Martin's rendering:

Suns go down but 'tis to rise  
Brighter in the morning skies;  
But, when sets our little light,  
We must sleep in endless night.

Or, as Touchstone puts it, "Rum ti tum ti tum ti tum, rum ti tum ti tum ti tum!"

Unbelievable jiggly rot! Sitting there in Girgenti it seemed to me impossible that any one could ever have thought that a rendering of Catullus. But many professors have thought so. If one of them accepts that translation of Catullus, does he ever see the point of Greek culture at all? I asked myself.

I sat there in Girgenti and wondered just what many of these classical professors would have thought of Acragas, Pindar's most beautiful city. And what sweeping judgments would they have passed on those ceremonies by night at Eleusis, those rites, those processions in the darkness, those orgies, which their admired Sophocles and Plato took so seriously: we know already how the early Christian fathers shuddered at them. And if the professors should come from those studies with their high moral tone and plaster casts and should see this Good Friday at Girgenti, see something of the reality of the thing they have so innocently been professoring about, see so much of the old life and the passionate soul of the Mediterranean lasting on here, what would they think of it? They can take quite seriously the procession at the inauguration of a college president. But this matter of Girgenti and the ceremonies—? Well, it's most interesting, these Italians are like children—perhaps a colored postal card of this can be found for the alumnus who gave the plaster Cicero to the Classics Room. Or at best they might think it picturesque, a pretty piece of paganism, crude, and, to say the least, unsanitary.

STARK YOUNG.